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COMPANY PROSECUTED FOR FALSE "ORGANIC" FOOD CLAIMS

A San Diego company that processed and sold olives, olive oil, and vinegar pled no contest in San Diego Municipal Court today to charges of theft by false representation, selling misbranded food, and processing food sold as "organic" without being registered with the State of California.

Under the terms of a plea agreement reached with the San Diego City Attorney's Office, Petrou Foods, Inc., was sentenced to three years probation and ordered to pay \$10,409 in fines and costs. Andreas Petrou, the company's vice president who also pled no contest to the charges, was sentenced to three years probation and ordered to pay \$1,200 in fines, serve one day in custody, and complete thirty days of community service work.

The City Attorney's Office filed criminal charges against the defendants following an investigation by the County Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures and the State Department of Health Services. The investigation revealed the defendants processed and sold olive oil, olives, and vinegar, falsely labeling the products as "organic." A food cannot be labeled "organic" in California if any materials prohibited by the State are used in the processing or handling of the food. Registration with the State is also required before food can be labeled "organic."

Deputy City Attorney Michael Rivo noted that health-conscious Californians are likely to purchase foods labeled as "organic." "Thanks to the efforts of the State and County offices that investigated the case, the labels which falsely identified the defendants' products as 'organic' were removed from the products in retail stores, and the violators were punished for misleading consumers and store owners who bought their products," said Rivo.

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